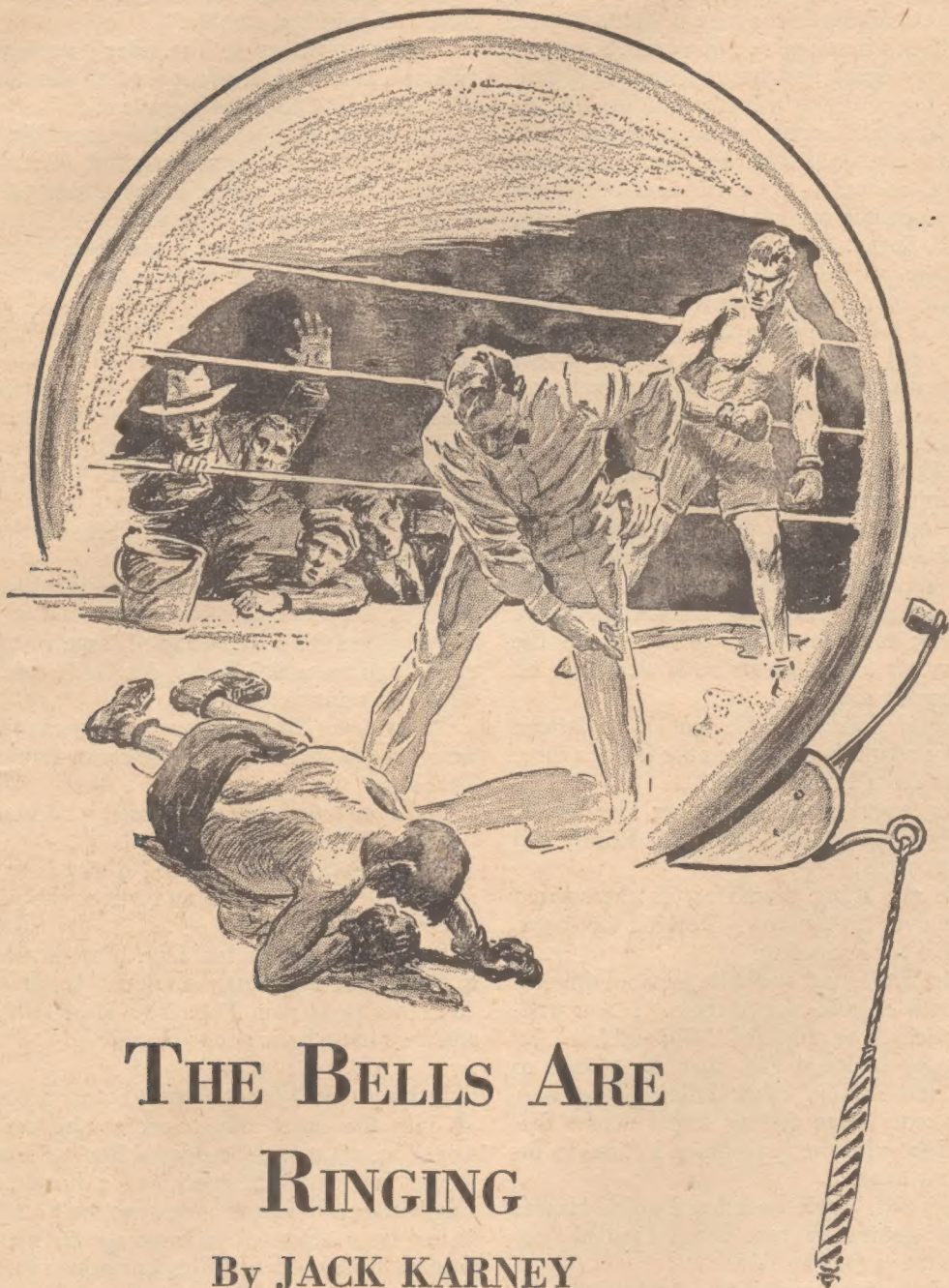


Those Bells Are in Your Head, Pug!



THE BELLS ARE RINGING

By JACK KARNEY

YOU come out of your corner, nice and slow, knowing that the Champ will play around for a round or two, feel you out, and you're glad. You want it that way. Maybe once you warm up you can forget. Maybe you can stop trying to figure

things out and concentrate on the fight. You can't spot the Champ a part of your brain and hope to win. You need everything you've got, mentally and physically, to beat the Champion of Champions. And you try hard to forget, but you can't. The Champ is a brown blur of lightning, in white and

black trunks. His left snaps your head back and already there's the taste of blood in your mouth . . . Francine . . . Virginia . . .

Rocky Sears and his manager Pop Beal came out of the matchmaker's office into the sun-drenched street and a dozen kids swarmed over Rocky for his autograph. While he was signing the slips of ragged paper, people walking by stopped to say, Hello, Rocky. Rocky grinned and said hello to these people he'd never seen before. A minute later the Champ himself came out and the kids made a run for the big brown man and Rocky was forgotten. Rocky laughed good-naturedly and Pop Beal said, "When you beat him, it'll be the other way around."

"When I beat him," Rocky said.

Virgie Beal, Pop's daughter, who'd been standing to one side, waiting for Rocky and her father, took Rocky's arm, looked up at him questioningly. She wasn't a beautiful girl, her nose was too small, the hazel eyes too big; her face needed powder to kill the shine; her long angular body was more on the boyish side.

Rocky nodded. "We got it, a fifteen rounder with the Champ in the Garden three weeks from Friday night."

The warm smile lit up her face as she squeezed his hand. "I'm glad, Rocky. I'm glad for you."

He ran a big thumb across the scarred tissue over his eyebrow. "For you too, baby, be glad for both of us."

Pop Beal, short and thin, grinned through a mouth of gold-capped teeth. "I hear wedding bells," he chuckled. "Big and loud."

Rocky hailed a cab, then he turned to Pop and said in mock relief, "You hear bells too? I was getting scared maybe that last fight with the Frenchman left marks inside my head."

Pop and Virgie exchanged quick glances as they got into the cab. When it pulled away from the curb, Pop said:

"That was a tough fight. And the French mattress couldn't smell the Champ's sweat. You won't have a picnic with the colored boy. I still say you shouldn't've signed. You've been in this game a long time, Rocky, too damn long . . ."

Rocky reached over, mussed up Pop's neatly combed gray hair. He said, a little gruffly, "You gonna go into that song

again?" He smiled. "Looks like I'm gonna have father-in-law trouble."

Virgie looked up at him. Her eyes were full of stardust when she looked at him like that. She said, "And don't you love it."

Pop shook his head. He looked troubled. "After Virgie and you are married, I'll find myself a room in a nice hotel. After you, Rocky, I couldn't find the ambition to start a new stable." There was a question in his voice. "I'm too old to teach a new kid the ropes."

Rocky winked down at Virgie. "Guess you're right, Pop."

Pop said, "You and Virgie, what would you do with an old duck like me around?"

Rocky sighed. "You're right, Pop."

Pop looked away, crestfallen. "An old duck like me," he said.

Virgie said, "Stop teasing Dad, Rocky. Tell him."

Rocky scratched his tousled brown hair, yawned.

Pop lifted his head, a ray of hope in his eyes. "Tell me what? Rocky, for God's sake, what you want to tell me?"

Rocky said, "Nothing much. Virgie and I, we're gonna build us a eight-room house. That's all."

Pop's mouth opened, closed, opened. "That's all?" he said.

Virgie patted Pop's hand. "Rocky is trying to tell you you're going to live with us. We need you, Dad."

Relief shining in his face, Pop turned to Rocky for confirmation. Rocky laughed. "Sure we need you, Pop. You know what stiff fees these baby sitters charge?"

THEY stopped for ice cream before going into the hotel. The clerk at the desk smiled up at the big-shouldered Rocky Sears, whose face bore the marks of a hundred ring battles. There was a message for Rocky. It had been delivered an hour ago by messenger. Rocky opened the envelope, read the brief note, read it again, stood staring down at the pink sheet of paper.

Pop said, "Something wrong?"

Rocky crumpled the paper, put it into his jacket pocket. He said tonelessly, "It's Francine. She's in town."

Pop muttered something under his breath. Virgie looked at Rocky, studying his face.

Pop said, "Let's go upstairs, Rocky."

"Yeah," Rocky said, "Let's go upstairs."

Rocky followed Pop and Virgie to the elevator. The door was open, the elevator boy waiting. Virgie and Pop went inside. Rocky stood outside, his forehead wrinkled.

Pop said, "We'll have soup instead of ice cream. C'mon, Rocky."

Abruptly, Rocky said, "You two go on up. I'll be along later." He looked at Virgie, looked away. "Go on up." He turned on his heel and was gone.

Going up in the elevator, Pop said, "Why did you let him go?"

She smiled with her lips but her eyes had no laughter in them. "Rocky's a big boy now, Dad. He should be able to take care of himself. Is she pretty, Dad?"

"Sure," Pop cried. "Beautiful and cold and hard. Like a marble statue. You got her beat by a mile. Why, your little finger—"

She smiled. "You sound slightly biased, Dad."

"It's true," he protested. "They was kids together, Rocky and Francine and Rocky had a crush on her. Rocky must have been blind . . . Maybe he still is," he said wonderingly. "Damn it."

In the fourth round the poker-faced Champ come in punching, a perpetual-motion machine, beautifully oiled. He catches you with a left, you never see the right. All of a sudden the floor comes up close to your face and you're counting every dirty spot, every crease. The crowd sings and you hear them nice and clear. You get up and the Champ swarms over you. You trade punches, then you're back on the ropes trying desperately to get away from the murderous barrage. Your legs go suddenly weak and you're down on hands and knees. Now the crowd's roar is a million miles away and the lights dance crazy before your eyes. You grab a rope. Up on one knee. You take a deep breath and up you go. The Champ moves in, black eyes lustreless, cold. You reach out to grab a hold and you grab air. The Champ is walking to his corner and you stand there five seconds before Pop Beal comes to tell you the round is over.

ROCKY walked down Broadway. Strangers nodded to him, said hello. Rocky answered mechanically. Francine Meadows, tall, blonde, beautiful. She'd always been a good looking kid. Even in the days when

she'd been Fanny Medowski, down on Tenth Avenue, she's had good looks.

She'd love to dance. Every chance she had she'd dance. Once she'd grabbed Rocky and right in the middle of the gutter, to the accompaniment of a harmonica they'd done a Lindy hop that had brought a scattering of coins from passers-by. It wasn't Rocky who'd brought the crowd. Francine with her big smile, her body twisting and turning sharply, beautifully, suggestively maybe—she'd brought that mob around. They'd been fourteen then. . . .

Thinking about it now, Rocky smiled inwardly. Francine had quickly picked up all the coins, with Rocky's help. He'd given her his large bandana handkerchief in which to hold the coins. There must have been about ten dollars in pennies, nickels, dimes, a couple quarters.

She'd said, "You shouldn't give all this money to me, Rocky. After all, some of the people must have meant some of it for you."

HED stared at her, wondering where she'd got the idea he'd given her all the money just because he'd loaned her his handkerchief. Then she'd counted off fifty cents and given the coins to him. She'd smiled and thanked him. When she'd gone he stood staring down at the money, then, in a fit of temper, he'd flung the coins over the gutter where some kids had lost no time in pouncing on the manna from heaven.

He'd been sore for a while, but you couldn't stay sore at Francine . . .

He took out the crumpled note in his pocket, read it again. It had been written on Hotel Parker stationery. It said:

Hello Rocky: Just learned from the sports pages you're in town. I would like to say hello and good luck. I hope you get that fight with the Champ. Give me a ring, won't you?

Love, Francine.

Love, Francine. Even on paper it gave him a funny feeling. Love, Francine. A four letter word that made your spine tingle.

He kicked a block of wood out of his way, watched it sail across the gutter and disappear under a car. He thought, what the hell am I getting so sore about? What's done

is done. She's out of my life, forever, finished. Now it's just me and Virgie . . .

At eighteen he'd loved Francine terribly. His proudest moment was when he presented her with a gold wrist watch he'd won for his fourth amateur fight. He'd converted the watch to fit a woman's wrist and she'd kissed him and told him how much she loved him, agreed to marry him the week before Christmas.

Then Francine had won that amateur dancing contest at Loew's. Five hundred dollars in cash, a two-week tour of various Loew's theatres in Chicago. A movie scout offered her a contract at one hundred dollars a week. Naturally she'd accepted. Christmas passed, then New Year's before he'd received a card. She hadn't forgotten Rocky Sears.

When he'd won six straight professional fights, he'd left Pop Beal and gone to Hollywood. Francine met him at the station, kissed him, whispered in his ear that soon they'd be married. He stayed in a hotel, visiting her occasionally in the beautiful house she occupied, a home befitting a starlet now earning two hundred dollars a week.

He was happy for a while. Even if he didn't see her as often as he would have liked—a girl in her position had to attend different parties, entertain at affairs given by big shot directors or producers—he was glad for the few hours he saw her on Sunday. One night he went with her to one of those parties. He stepped out on the balcony in time to see one of the drunks mauling her, kissing her. Rocky heaved the man off the balcony into a rose bush. Francine got very angry. The drunk was a famous director and, it seemed, big directors weren't handled in this barbarian fashion.

They'd quarreled and he'd gone back to New York. Within the month he read in the papers of the Las Vegas marriage of Francine Meadows and Frank Covan, the same Frank Covan Rocky had deposited in the rose bush.

Rocky put his heart and soul into the fight game. In two years he'd earned a fight with the Mexican, chief contender to the throne. It had been a good fight but the Mexican packed too much dynamite in his fists. Rocky took the count in the fourth, sixth and tenth rounds and lost the decision.

Pop had stormed all over the dressing

room after the fight, blamed Rocky's loss on Francine Meadows. "Why the hell doesn't she go back to Hollywood where she belongs?" Francine had divorced the director, and come to New York. "You could have licked the Mex if you'd kept your mind on your training, 'stead of gallivantin' around with that dame."

Rocky lost the next three in a row, the last by a technical knockout. Francine returned to the Coast where a new contract awaited her. Rocky, sick at heart, enlisted, did a three year hitch and, the war over, went back to Pop Beal, back to the boxing game.

Somehow the game was different now, training was harder, the punches hurt more, his feet weren't as spry as they used to be and his timing had lost its split second sharpness. But he did all right. Even if he did absorb a lot of punches that would have been misses in the old days, Rocky won five in a row, two in Denver, two in St. Louis and one in Chicago where he'd outslugged the state champ despite a broken right hand.

He'd stayed in Chicago for a while, came on to New York to get a fight with the Champ . . .

Rocky Sears was supposed to be a mild workout for the Champ. The Champ thought so. The newspapers were already calling Rocky victim number twenty-five. The whole boxing world believed it. They said it was nice of the Champ. Rocky Sears needed the money . . .

Rocky smiled to himself. He'd fool them, the whole lot of them. All he needed was one opening, one right hand shot at the Champ's jaw . . .

THE clerk at the Hotel Parker informed Rocky that Miss Francine Meadows was not in her room and had left no messages. Rocky walked up Seventh Avenue. The sun was gone and swift dusk was falling over the city. A cool breeze stirred the dust in the gray steets. Rocky turned east on 47th Street. In the center of the block an electric sign hung from an iron bar. It said, Sammy's Bar and Grill. Rocky went inside. Francine Meadows sat at the far end of the bar, alone. She watched Rocky cross the floor, slide onto the stool next to her.

There was no surprise in her face, a smile curling the corners of her red lips. She said

throatily, "Hello, Rocky. Long time no see."

He said, "Three years ain't so long."

She looked beautiful as ever. The years couldn't age the smooth, softly-rounded face. Her blonde hair was a golden mound on top of her head. The throat was creamy white down to the swell of the breasts showing through the V-neck blouse.

She said, "I waited around the hotel for a call from you. Then I came here." The last time she'd been in New York, three, four years ago they'd spent many an evening in this place, talking, drinking . . .

She said, "When I want to think of you and me, I come here."

The words sounded trite and flat. Then she smiled . . .

She drank dry Martinis, he sipped cokes and they talked of old times. She listened to him, hung on every word as if her life depended on it, her lips parted, eyes wide and blue, watching his face muscles as he spoke. She told him of Hollywood, how soon she would get another contract. An agent was trying to swing it for her.

She said, "You're back in the big money, Rocky, aren't you?"

He said, "I will be after this fight. All I gotta do is beat the Champ." He smiled, laughed. "That's all I gotta do."

She finished the drink, ordered another.

She said, "A fight with the Champ should bring you a lot of money."

"Twenty grand, maybe a little more."

About to put the glass down, she stopped short. A surprised little flicker hurried across her face. Now her eyes were cool, calculating.

She said, "Twenty thousand dollars?"

He smiled. "It's more money than I ever got for one fight. It's the Champ who's making it for me. Four Rocky Sears couldn't draw more than flies. The Champ gave me a break."

She said again, "Twenty thousand dollars. And you'll beat the Champ."

"I'll beat him all right," he said. "A million bucks is gonna push me right up into the Championship. A million bucks . . ."

Her blue eyes were alive and warm. "I hope you murder him, Rocky."

He shrugged. "Let's talk about you. You didn't marry again?"

She shook her head. She said, looking into her empty glass. "It took me a long while

but I learned that when a girl loves the first time it's real love, the real unadulterated stuff. After that she's just kidding herself."

HER voice was husky, throbbing and he had a queer feeling, the same kind of delicious shivers that raced up his back when he was saluting the flag and the bugler blew taps. It felt good, yet slightly uncomfortable.

She said, "I'll never marry again, Rocky . . . Never . . . Unless . . ." She shook herself, laughed shortly "Don't mind me, Rocky. Seeing you again has made me melancholy." Her eyes came up to his, blue eyes, soft, full of wistfulness. "I'm trying to tell you, Rocky, it was you all the time, when we were kids, when we grew up, all the time it was you. I had you, Rocky, I had you and let you go."

The air was full in his lungs, his knuckles white around the six-ounce coke glass.

Her voice was hardly more than a whisper. "All of a sudden, Rocky, I find that I still love you. Can you understand that?"

He cried angrily, "What am I supposed to do, get down on my knees and play dog?"

"I'm sorry, Rocky," she said quickly. She drew away from him. "I don't blame you. You must hate me terribly."

"If I did, I wouldn't be here."

She pushed the glass away from her. She said, "I messed up things, didn't I? It could have been so different."

"Let's not cry about it, huh? How long you out of a job?"

She smiled. "Too long, Rocky. But I'll get another—"

"You're broke?"

She didn't answer for a while, then she said, "I'm broke. But if you offer me any money, I'll get angry."

He took a roll of bills out of his pocket. Rocky had never owned a wallet. He peeled off two bills, put one on the bar to pay for the drinks, one in his pocket, the rest at her elbow.

He said, "There's a little over a hundred in there."

Looking at the money, she said, "I can't take it, Rocky. I won't."

He slipped off the stool. "I've got to run along now."

Her eyes came up to his face. "When will I see you again? Tomorrow? Here? Rocky,

don't run away from me for another three years. I couldn't stand it. I'm not accustomed to plead for a date, Rocky."

He said, like a schoolboy reciting his lessons, "You know Pop Beal. Pop has a daughter. Her name is Virginia. She used to live with an aunt. The aunt died. Now Virgie's with Pop. She's a good kid, the best. We're going to get married."

Somehow it was hard to surprise Francine. She said, "You love her, Rocky?"

"Tomorrow we're going to get the license. Right after the fight we'll get married. She's a swell kid."

A smile rippled behind the surface of her blue eyes and he felt a vague unease.

She said, "I'm sure she is, Rocky. I'll be here tomorrow in case you want to talk."

He snapped, "So long, Francine."

She watched him go out into the street. She lit a cigarette, smiled. Carelessly she picked up the roll of bills, dropped it into her handbag. She ordered another Martini, then went to the juke box and dropped a nickel into the hole. The music filled the room while she drank her Martini.

He didn't go to Sammy's Bar and Grill the next night nor the night after, but on Saturday he came in for a coke and she was there, waiting, her expression void of surprise.

BEFORE the eighth round is a minute old you're bleeding from a cut over your left eye, an old scar opened by a razor-sharp left hand. How many scars you got, Rocky? How many times you been cut and sewed up and cut again? Over the eyes, the lips, the bridge of the nose, around the cheekbones . . . The Champ stabs and hooks and crosses and you try to put over that one punch. That's all you need, one punch. There's a sound, like a bee flying around, inside your head. Maybe it's the crowd singing. The canvas is hard against your face. What you doing down there, Rocky? Up, Rocky. C'mon, like in push-ups in the gym, push up. But it's hard. Something heavy is on your back, your legs weigh you down like two chunks of lead. Finally you're up, swaying like in a moving train. The Champ shuffles out of the neutral corner and the iron band around your chest is so tight you can't breathe. The bell sounds like sweet music . . .

Rocky confined his training to Stillman's

on Eighth Avenue. Training out in the country costs too much. Every other day Francine came to watch him.

Two days before the scheduled fight, while Rocky was taking his last full workout, she came again. This time there was a man with her, a tall, good-looking man, a little on the elderly side, with blond hair that curled in the back. He had gray, watery eyes.

The round over, Rocky went to his corner where Pop Beal ran a towel over that part of the face not covered by the head-guard.

Then Pop smeared big chunks of vaseline over Rocky's face. Rocky went one more round with a shorter, faster man, returned to Pop Beal who unlaced the gloves, helped remove the guard, threw a towel over Rocky's head.

Rocky climbed down. "Hi, Fanny," he grinned.

She introduced him to John Evans and they shook hands. Evans glowed at meeting Rocky Sears.

He said, "It's an honor. So you're the next Champ."

Rocky said, "You're not kidding, brother."

Virgie said, "You're standing in a draft, Rocky. Hello," she nodded at Francine, smiled at the blond man.

Rocky shifted his feet uncomfortably. The first time the two women had met they had measured each other with cold open hostility. Even Rocky could sense it, though their talk had sounded friendly enough. It was in their eyes, in the way Francine's lips curled when she talked, in the way Virgie smiled with her lips, the usual warmth lacking in the rest of her face.

Francine smiled a brief, cool smile. "You wouldn't be Rocky's trainer by any chance?" she said to Virgie.

"No, just a messenger girl," Virgie said, "for Rocky's manager."

Francine lit a cigarette, eyebrows lifted.

Rocky, said, grinning, "Virgie helps Pop keep me on my toes."

Pop Beal called from across the floor. Rocky said, "The boss is calling. See you later."

He went to the mat, near the window, John Evans following. Francine sucked on the cigarette, her eyes slowly going over Virgie as if appraising the value of the

print dress, the imitation gold bracelet on her arm, the black shoes.

Virgie stared back at her, her face flat, emotionless.

Francine said, "You don't like me, do you?"

Virgie didn't smile. "No. And the feeling is mutual. I'm sure. Why do you come here?"

Francine laughed. "My, you are blunt, aren't you?" She stopped laughing abruptly. "I came here to see Rocky and if it worries you it makes me very happy."

"Miss Meadows, I'm not a student of your barroom repartee. I couldn't hope to compete with you there. Rocky and I are going to be married Saturday morning. We've got the license. We intend to use it. So why don't you make yourself scarce and make everybody happy?"

Her eyes narrowed sharply. "Stop shaking, my dear. You wouldn't be the first girl—I'm giving you the benefit of the doubt—who was left holding an unused license. To match your bluntness, my dear, I could tell you what to do with that license—if I weren't a lady."

Pop found Virgie later, staring out the window. He said, "You look like somebody stepped on your pet corn."

Her smile was mirthless. "Dad, did you ever get a yearning to pull out a handful of pretty blonde hair?"

Pop took her hand, looked at the fingernails, shook his head sadly. "You'll be spotting her too many inches of nail." He smacked his lips. "Honey, you got a bright head on her shoulders. I'll bet my dough you can out-manuever a blonde anytime."

She stared at him, her fists clenched at her sides. After a while a smile spread over her face, her fingers opened and she relaxed. Rocky, doing sitting-up exercises on the mat, stopped abruptly, his fingertips inches away from his toes. Virgie was talking to John Evans and the blond man was laughing at something she'd said. They seemed to be enjoying each other's company.

YOU don't know what keeps you up. For ten rounds you've been eating brown soggy leather and you're tired, very tired. The canvas is stained with a lot of blood, your blood. How can you win, Rocky? The

Champ is too fast, he won't stand still to let you explode your right hand. . . . But you got to keep trying, you got to. . . . The Champ has lost his poker face. He's got lines in his forehead, deep grooves full of sweat. Maybe he's worried, maybe he's scared. So you walk in, take two punches to land one, connect with a left and a right. But the Champ is rolling away. You bob and weave and walk into a punch that stops you dead in your tracks. This is it, Rocky, the finish. You can't move your arms any more, you can't lift your legs. You won't. . . . But you do. Somehow you find that extra strength. Somehow you move under a whistling right, connect with one of your own. The Champ goes back, his mouth open. Now there's blood on his mouth. A sob comes up out of your chest. You hit him again and again and the water splashes. The Champ is down and when he gets up you just stand there and gulp air.

The night before the fight the four of them went out together, Virgie and Rocky, John Evans and Francine. It was Rocky's night to relax and take his mind off the fight. Originally it was to be a two-party affair, Rocky and Virgie, but Francine had pouted when Rocky told her and finally, he'd asked Virgie if she'd mind company. To his surprise she'd readily agreed.

Until ten o'clock they danced at the Quarters. Rocky danced with Virgie then with Francine but as the evening wore on it seemed as if everytime he turned to Virgie for the next dance, she was out on the floor with John Evans. So it was Francine who monopolized most of his dances.

Francine suggested a ride out in the country. There was an inn out on Long Island that served the best food, had the best entertainment and the hottest band in the state. Rocky shook his head. He'd get to bed too late.

Virgie said, "Why, Rocky, you can sleep later tomorrow. It's only ten o'clock, too early to go home. Please, Rocky."

Rocky rode in Francine's roadster, Virgie in John Evans' car. It didn't seem odd at the time. Francine could have left her car home but as she'd said:

"John and I might want to stay late, then you and Virgie could take my car."

There was a funny look in Virgie's eyes when Francine said that, an odd mixture of

relief and triumph. Rocky shrugged his shoulders. He had enough trouble figuring out women without analyzing their facial expressions.

John Evans' car led the way. Rocky sloped in his seat, resting his head on the back of the seat. They'd just crossed the Queensboro Bridge when he heard a sound come out of Francine's month. It wasn't exactly a sob, more like a gasp when a sudden pain grips you tight.

He sat up straight. Her hands were tight on the wheel. The car wobbled. Rocky grasped the wheel.

"I don't feel well," she said. "I think I'm going to be sick."

She managed to swing the car to the curb. They sat there for a while but she didn't feel any better.

Rocky said, "There's a doctor up the street."

She shook her head. "Take me home, Rocky. I—I'm sorry I had to spoil the party."

"That's all right," he said. "Virgie and John must be miles from here."

"When I get home, I'll call the Inn. You drive, Rocky."

ROCKY took the key from her and opened her apartment door. She passed him, flicked on the lights. He stood in a luxurious living room, the rosewood furniture glistening in the electric light, the fawn-colored rug thick, the gold and blue tapestries matching the couch and odd chairs. He whistled noiselessly.

She read his mind. "Oh, I couldn't afford this layout. Not now, anyway. A friend—a girl friend now in California—let me have the place."

He noted in a dull sort of way that she seemed much better now. He sat down on the couch.

"You'd better call the Inn. Virgie and John will be worried."

She sat down beside him. "I'll call later. Right now, I want to talk to you, Rocky."

He said, "There was nothing wrong with you. You just wanted to get away from Virgie and John Evans."

She said calmly, "Forgive me, Rocky. I had to talk to you alone and this seemed the only way. Rocky, I've got an offer to return to Hollywood. a part in a new picture.

Oh, it isn't a very big role but my agent thinks it might lead to bigger, better parts."

He looked at her with a quiet, level glance. "It's what you want, isn't it?"

She got up, walked around the room, tall, stately, beautiful. She stopped in front of him. "Rocky, what do I want? Tell me. Tell me you don't want me to go."

His mouth was very dry all of a sudden. He lifted his big palms up. "I'll miss you, Francine. I'm going to miss you a lot."

She sat down, took his hands. Her voice was throbbing, pleading. "Don't let me go, Rocky. Tell me you want me to stay here with you." Her face was close to his, the lips partly open, the eyes creasing his face. "Rocky, I love you. You know that."

He said, "It's no good, Francine."

"You love me, Rocky. Tell me you love me?"

Her perfume was sweet, tantalizing, thick in his head, sweet fog. . . . "Virgie and I are getting married Saturday."

"You don't love her, Rocky. It's me you love, me, Francine."

He kissed her and her lips burned against his, sweet lips, wet, soft, clinging. "God, Francine," he said hoarsely.

She was panting now. "You and I, Rocky, we were always meant for each other. I'm in your blood and you're part of me. Kiss me, darling. Hold me tight."

He heard the key in the lock. Francine stiffened, her eyes full of disgust as she stared over his shoulder. Rocky turned. John Evans and Virgie were in the doorway. Rocky got up. It was quiet, a long heavy quietness. Rocky looked at Francine. She was pale and there was a sickness in her eyes.

John Evans said apologetically to Francine, "I'm sorry. I didn't know you'd be here." He smiled briefly. "Otherwise, I would have knocked."

Rocky looked down at the key in his hand. His eyes narrowed, the muscles in his jaws tightened.

Francine's lips moved. "I can explain everything, Rocky."

He ignored her. He said to Virgie, "What the hell are you doing here?"

Virgie's eyes were wide and innocent. "John wanted to show me his stamp collection so we decided to let you go to the Inn while we came back here."

Francine looked at her suspiciously. "You're very clever but you just wasted your time. Rocky. . . ."

Rocky said, "I know. You can explain everything." His face was dark and scowling. "I need a lot of explaining." He took Virgie's arm. "First, you got some talking to do, a lot of talking." He steered her to the door.

Francine cried, "I'll see you tomorrow, Rocky."

"Tomorrow," he said, "maybe I can think straight."

They went out the door, into the elevator, out into the street. They walked a block.

Rocky said, "I don't hear a word."

Virgie stared straight ahead. "John told me he had a stamp—"

"It was a dirty trick," he cried.

"Nothing is dirty in war and love," she said, her voice quivering.

"There must be an explanation. I mean about John Evans and that key."

She cried, "Don't stay up all night trying to figure it out."

She opened the door of a cab standing on the brightly-lighted corner.

"Wait a minute," Rocky cried. "Don't run out on me now."

"Good-night," she said, slamming closed the door.

"You haven't explained—"

The cab pulled away from the corner and he stood there staring after it, anger and bewilderment etched on his punch-marked face.

YOU meet the Champ in the center of the ring. You touch gloves and the Champ looks tired, his bloody face is drawn. It's been a long time since he went fifteen rounds. And you're not tired. You got that extra juice in your legs. That's what you think. Then the Champ hits you in the belly, brings his punches up to the head and the extra strength is gone, like the blood on the canvas it just comes out of you. You time your punches. One right hand, just one. . . . The Champ pokes with a slow left. You come under it and swing once, twice. The Champ moves back. You put your weight behind a right, let everything you got ride on the punch. The Champ shudders. The breath is a hard rock in your chest but you keep coming forward. The Champ reaches

out to grab and hold. You send a right hand past his guard. You feel the punch go up your arm to your shoulder, down your spine. The Champ is down, like a ton of bricks he goes down. You move to a neutral corner on wooden legs. The count is six. You lean on the ropes and look out at the crowd. The count is eight. You turn and the count is nine and the Champ is up and the bell is ringing.

The announcer is collecting the slips. You sit in your corner and the two judges have voted.

Now the referee. The announcer goes to the microphone which comes down out of the lights. It's quiet. The announcer reads the first slip. One judge has voted eight rounds for the Champ, seven for you. The second judge says its your fight nine rounds to five and one even. The crowd is waiting. Pop Beal is tense at your side. One more vote, one more slip of paper. Then it comes. Seven rounds for the Champ, six for you and two even. . . .

ROCKY lay on the dressing room table and soon the doctor had finished sewing up his cuts. Pop Beal handed Rocky an ice bag and it felt good on his battered face. Pop stood over him, worried.

Pop said, "You shoulda got it, Rocky. It was close but you shoulda got it."

Rocky's lips hurt when he spoke. He said, "The Champ is good. I banged my right ~~hand~~ flush on the button—" He shifted the ice bag, closed his eyes.

When he opened them again Francine had come in. She was smoking a cigarette, the smoke curling around her lips and nose.

She said, "So you didn't make it, Rocky. Don't let it get you down. Next time you can't miss."

Pop Beal blurted. "There won't be a next time, not if I can help it. How many more punches you think he can take around the head?" Then to Rocky, "I'm sorry, kid, but I had to speak my piece."

Francine blew smoke through her nose. "I think Rocky is smart enough to know how much more he can take. Next time, Rocky, it'll be Rocky Sears, Champion of the World. A million dollars, Rocky. You said so yourself."

Rocky said, "Pop, catch." He threw the ice bag and Pop caught it skillfully with one

hand. Rocky swung around, his long legs dangling over the side of the table.

The door opened and Joe Oliver, the gray-haired boxing promoter, came in. "Rocky, my boy," he sang, patting his paunch, "you had that crowd standing on their ears. You know what a return fight with the Champ will draw? Pop! Pop Beal, come over here where I can talk to both of you."

"No," Pop said, the blood thick in his face. "Rocky's not getting any younger. Next time maybe the Champ will train a little harder. It won't be this close."

Joe Oliver smacked his thick lips. "You talk like you got no confidence in your boy." He turned to Rocky. "Look, kid, here's the set-up. The Champ goes to England where he'll knock the English champ cuckoo. Comes January, a new year and the Champ will need fresh money to pay this year's income taxes. So will you, Rocky. Suppose we match you and the Champ for a return fight in the Garden?"

"I say no," Pop cried.

Francine said, "Rocky, I had the idea you wore the pants in this organization. Or does Pop make the decisions?"

ROCKY smiled, stopping short, wincing with pain. He said, "Pop, who makes the decisions around here?"

Pop turned away. "It's your funeral."

Joe Oliver smiled at Francine, his eyes traveling over her figure. "Then it's okay, Rocky? The newsboys are outside waiting."

Rocky said dreamily, "Pop, Billy Wexler wants to sell his gym. I'll need somebody to help me run the joint."

Pop wheeled, his face breaking out in a grin. "I'm your boy, Rocky. I'm your boy."

Joe Oliver said, "Rocky, thirty grand you'll make in a return fight—"

Rocky shook his head. "I'm through, Joe. I'm burying my gloves for good."

Francine cried, "Rocky, isn't it a little foolish giving up a good thing? Thirty thousand dollars is a lot of money. How

long will it take you to make that kind of money operating a gym?"

Rocky smiled with his eyes. "I'll make a living, I still got my health, what more can a guy ask for?"

"Think it over," Joe Oliver said.

"I'm tired of eating leather, Joe. I got a lot of rosin in my hair and it's time I washed it out. Thanks, Joe."

Joe Oliver shrugged. "Maybe you'll change your mind. See you around."

He started to leave but Francine said, "Just a minute." She flung a butt to the floor, didn't bother to step on it. "Rocky, tell him you'll think it over."

"No," Rocky said.

Her cheeks were a dull, smouldering red. "I had plans for us, Rocky, big plans, but they didn't include living on peanuts."

Rocky stared at her, said nothing.

She said, "I like New York, I want to hang around. I don't want to go back to Hollywood."

He said, "If you stick around, you can come up to Wexler's gym, after I buy it. I'll give you a season pass. It's the least I can do for an old friend."

She searched his face and there was laughter in his eyes.

She said, "So that's how it is?"

"Give my regards to anybody I know out in Hollywood."

She opened her lips to say something, closed them tight, wheeled and went from the room.

Pop said, happily, "I'm glad you're quitting, Rocky."

"Cut the gab," Rocky said gently. "Where's Virgie hiding?" He saw her standing near the window. "You been here all the time?"

She walked over to him. "I came in a few minutes ago. Oh, Rocky!"

He took her arm, pulled her close. "Hello, Virgie," he said softly, kissing her, unmindful of his bruised lips.

Pop grinned. He could hear the wedding bells ringing again. Loud bells, clear and sweet.

